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AUTHOR O'Keefe, Heather C.
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ABSTRACT

Noting that advertising students in smaller colleges have little opportunity for exposure to major advertising companies as role models, the advertising class at a North Dakota university was given the opportunity to design an actual magazine layout to promote the university's Aerospace Science Center. The winning ad, as judged by the dean of the center and his staff, would be published in three issues of a trade magazine for pilots with a circulation of 88,000. The assignment was carefully structured to mirror as closely as possible the actual working relationship with a client--in this case, the public relations specialist of the center--while still making the most of instructional opportunities. Following presentations by the client, the class explored the target market, and then the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Next, students had to devise a campaign that took into consideration monetary constraints, and using both a thematic approach and one that emphasized a different selling point in each ad. Finally, the students explored appropriate styles for the ad. The assignment was greeted with more enthusiasm than any previous class project. Students, who felt challenged, developed materials for their portfolios and were exposed to the competition and criticism that results from high industry standards. (HTH)

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A STRATEGY FOR PLAYING IN THE MAJORS WHEN YOU'RE IN THE MINORS

A Paper for Presentation at the Association
for Journalism and Mass Communication

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by Heather C. O'Keefe
Assistant Professor of Communication

University of North Dakota
Box 8118, University Station
Grand Forks, ND 58202

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It is difficult to move students from the theoretical and academic aspects of advertising into the actual, competitive world. Apart from problems of motivation (the university experience seems to produce equal measures of lethargy and creativity) there is the very real problem of mechanics -- of what to do in the classroom.

Great ideas seldom germinate in a classroom atmosphere in which the instructor "tells" the student what good advertising strategies are. The exceptional student excells in spite of the university experience; the majority of students survive by completing projects that they know only some of their peers will see.

Students and instructors in smaller universities, often far removed from the major centers of advertising, face another dilemma. The aspiring account executive, creative copywriter or layout artist has little opportunity to be exposed to appropriate role models. The exposure to their future careers comes mainly from sources such as Ad Age magazine. Local advertising companies (many of them "pa and ma" agencies) are not sophisticated. Students "see" the end products of large advertising projects in the mass media, but we can't invite the creators of the ad into our classrooms, or visit their agencies. Classroom exercises are relegated to just being exercises ("portfolio material"). Competition is limited to advertising "contests," which have their function, but often offer the individual student as much chance of winning the contest as a

state lottery. Certainly real-life advertising situations draw on a much smaller pool of competitors than a national contest.

Having taught at a university in a small northern community (population 53,000) for the past three years, I decided early on that in order for my students to succeed they needed more real life experience than they were receiving. I know -- easier said than done, but the countless changes and trends occuring in advertising have brought with them an equal number of innovative approaches available to the instructor. The instructor has only to assess the resources available locally and (I can't stress this enough) determine the extent of the market.

I would like to share a project that my Copywriting and Layout class undertook in the fall of 1985 that sparked more enthusiasm and dedication than I have seen in many years. Although I will be describing a specific project, I would like to emphasize that with a little research and some imagination it can be adapted to any locale with a marketable service or product.

The Project

The class was given the opportunity to design an actual magazine layout to promote our University's Aerospace Science Center. The winning ad (as judged by the Dean of the Center and his staff) would be published in the March, April and July issues of Private Pilot magazine (net paid circulation 88,000). For most of the students, this was the first time they would design an advertisement for anything other than a college class.

The assignment was carefully structured to mirror as closely as possible the actual working relationship with a client, while still making the most of instructional opportunities -- in other

words, the experience of the real world, coupled to the student-instructor relationship of the classroom. This was not only an ideal client-agency relationship, but also a real one.

The day I announced the project, I asked the public information specialist of the center to be present and help in the presentation. Throughout the semester we had numerous conferences with our "client." The guidelines of the ad were as structured as possible, while still encouraging creativity.

We began by exploring the philosophy and rationale for the advertisement. The underlying factor was the adoption of a more aggressive recruitment strategy to attract students into the aviation program at the university. Students were told what the objectives of the advertisement were: 1) increase awareness of the program; 2) clearly separate the program from the half dozen other aviation programs that advertise; and 3), the difficult part, attempt to transform an interest in flying into an interest in obtaining a four-year degree in aviation. What type of advertisement would prompt a prospective student into writing for more information?

The first task facing the class was to get to know their client. The students needed to discover how the Center perceived itself, and then determine what kind of image they wanted to project to prospective students. Having a client representative available to students was critical to the success of the project. The information provided by the center answered student queries and provided a background for the design of the advertisement. The center specialist made an extensive audio-visual presentation that explained the specialized degrees offered by the center.

Next we explored the target market. Market research done by aviation schools found that future pilots begin reading flying magazines long before they begin pilot training. It was also discovered that most prospective pilots who enter an aviation program have some connection within their family to the aviation industry. Their fathers or uncles were pilots; someone in their family was a flight attendant, mechanic, airport manager, or dispatcher. Market research also showed that friends made an impact -- the peer influence was important not only for generating an interest in aviation but (more important for us) in getting each other to attend the same school.

Students also discovered that flying is expensive. For example, in order for a student to obtain the basic ratings required for commercial piloting, he or she could expect to spend upwards to $18,000 completing an undergraduate degree in this particular program. This became an important consideration in segmenting the market. The advertising students were reminded that the ad should have a selective audience appeal. An appeal to class, rather than mass appeal, was suggested. There was also an important geographical consideration. Aviation students already in the program came from all areas of the United States and about a dozen foreign countries. Statistically, this added up to about 75 percent of the students coming from outside the state. A state or regional appearing advertisement was deemed inappropriate.

After establishing who the ad should reach, the class focused on the program itself. The class explored both the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the program, not only to minimize the

former and highlight the latter, but also to deal with what might be termed the perceived weaknesses and attempt to turn them into positive selling points.

Geographical location was determined to be the major perceived weakness that could keep prospective students from responding to the ad. But from a classroom perspective this was an added benefit, since the students creating this advertisement were already students in the same university. In order for them to effectively turn a weakness to our advantage we spent some time discussing their own perceptions of where they were. Why would anyone want to come to a severe northern climate and learn how to fly when they could also choose a warmer locale? This was a marketing problem. The aviation department was secure in the feeling that once they came and saw the facilities, the program would sell itself. But how to get prospective students to come in the first place? Here the product itself turned out to be the answer: from an aeronautical standpoint, the cold winters are actually a plus for a number of reasons, each with its own selling point. First, the skyways are uncluttered for relatively worry-free training. Second, the terrain is some of the flattest in the United States. From this emerged an interesting concept. What would be the pros and cons of an advertisement that eluded to all these soft, gentle and flat wheat fields as potential emergency landing sites? It was decided that this wouldn't be a workable approach, mostly because it would be a risky one, and also because most aviation students don't think in terms of aborted flights and crash landings. Students had a third weather-related plus available to them: the fact that the cold

and clear winter weather is considered to be the optimal weather condition for aircraft engine performance. Also discussed were the merits of not making the climate an issue at all, for which there was a good psychological marketing reason. Why try to sell the only negative part of the program?

From weaknesses, perceived and real, we moved to a discussion of the program strengths. (Here, the aerospace department was very helpful. They felt they had a lot of strengths.) Students were reminded to keep in mind all of the program strengths when they composed their advertisement, but also to determine which strength would be the most attractive to prospective students. Which strength to concentrate on would be dependent on the type of ad the student composed.

At the top of the list was the actual quality of the program itself. And after our exploration of prospective pilots, their mind sets and career goals, we felt this was the appropriate approach. The aerospace department boasted of being the most highly respected collegiate aviation program in the United States. They also have the newest and most modern academic aviation facilities in the nation, as well as the best equipped and most extensive flight training school. And unlike some of their competitors, they are not a vocational flight training school. They even have a former astronaut listed on the faculty roster.

What were other qualities that might sell the program? Here we took a second look at our market. Students were more likely than not to come from high socio-economic backgrounds, and most would need plenty of parental monetary support. What might be

qualities that prospective students might overlook, but parents would appreciate? It was decided that most, if not all, parents would choose an accredited four year university experience over a technical school, provided that the programs otherwise were on an equal footing. This program offered students English from an actual professor of English -- not from the same person who taught them ground school that morning.

The third strength determined was also partly aimed at parents rather than students. While most aviation students do come from well-to-do families, that didn't mean cost was not a concern. Here was another major plus for the copywriting class to capitalize on. This program, even including out of state tuition, was still less expensive than many of the competitors. By comparison, a student could pay out of state tuition for four years, obtain commercial flying ratings and a degree, for about the cost of a year's tuition at an ivy-league school. Again, we felt this combination of a top rated program at a relative bargain was the best approach for students to take, but this was only a starting point. It was up to class members to transform the material they gathered into the actual ad.

After the students knew enough about the service they would be trying to sell and the target market they were aiming to sell it to, they were ready to start the real work of the project. While the research was conducted as a class, the creative portion of the ad was left to the individual class member.

The Creative Strategy

The actual advertisement would have some restraints. It would appear in a general aviation magazine with a nationwide

readership, but the budget was a problem. The aerospace people didn't know how much they would be allowed for advertising yet, how many times and in how many magazines the advertisement would appear, whether color could be used, whether it would be a full-page ad and so on. Their indecision mirrored the indecisiveness of many advertisers who look to their agency for recommendations.

Again, although they wouldn't be making the final decision, student input was welcomed and encouraged. Given the monetary constraints, what would be the best value? An advertisement every other month? A successive run for six months? The students reviewed the pros and cons of whether a big, expensive ad for only a month or two would be more productive, or whether a smaller ad spread out over a longer period of time would do just as well. As with every other aspect of this project, students were expected to answer these questions and then discuss them in class. This approach helped the class perceive the project as a real, working project needing time and commitment.

My expectations were high. I recommended that students devise a year's worth of advertising, which included a full-page color layout to run twice a year, a two-thirds page advertisement twice a year, and a sixth of a page ad for remaining issues. I suggested two thematic alternatives: design the entire campaign around one theme, or, use a different approach in each advertisement with each emphasizing a different selling point. Students needed exposure to both approaches since each presented different difficulties and problems.

Finally, we discussed what sets apart a quality, creative

advertising concept from a square box containing information. What should the style of the ad be? Should it attempt to tell the whole story by cramming everything into a small space? Why don't most quality ads take that approach? How much white space should there be? How do you convince the client that he should pay for white space when, from his perspective, he could use that square inch for flying rates? For a different perspective on these questions we looked at the ads of the competition, most of which were poorly designed. They became very useful in illustrating to students some concrete answers to some of the questions I had raised in class about their own ads. The ads that had the best chance of winning would send its intended audience to their desk to write for more information. Or, even easier, to pick up the telephone and use the toll-free number to the program's enrollment services. The concept of consumer active-response was, indeed, the major objective of the ad. Students were expected to develop a sound strategy and rationale in the ad which would trigger an immediate response.

As all of us in the teaching profession know, motivation continues to be a problem area. For this project I was able to sweeten the reward. Remember that the client -- whether it's an aviation department, a medical school, a law school, or whatever -- is gaining many benefits for essentially a very low investment. The only real expenditure is the cost of running the ad. So it wasn't difficult to obtain more for the winning entry than the reward of seeing the ad in "real" print and getting a good grade for the project. The aerospace department was willing to award $50 to the student whose concept was chosen. More

importantly, they were also willing to let that student include on his or her employment record the title of ad consultant to the aviation program of the university, backed up with a letter of recommendation to prospective employers.

The typical student response to the project? They loved it. The assignment was greeted with more enthusiasm than any previous class project I've undertaken. The students not only felt challenged, they also experienced a good amount of self-growth and self-confidence, especially the two students whose ads were selected to appear in three issues of Private Pilot magazine. For the students who didn't win I would not underestimate the value of such a project. Granted that portfolio material is important for the would be ad-executive, a real life experience in advertising can do more for the educational goals of the student than just fill up the portfolio.

Students were also exposed to two other industry standards: competition and criticism. In a sense, each student became a mini-advertising agency by providing not only the creative portion of the ad, but also the rationale behind the concept.

As with any real life situation, the students opened themselves and their work to criticism when the winning design was chosen. For some students, the experience was beneficial; for others, it was humbling. Students learned that industry standards are high, and that second rate work isn't acceptable. Students experienced what it is like to compete for accounts with other ad agencies. Not only does their work have to be good; they have to be prepared to convince the advertiser that it is better than the competition.

Follow-up

The winning advertising design chosen by the Center for Aerospace Sciences Dean and his staff was a combination of two student entries -- the headline of one and the art work of another.

The full-page advertisement first appeared in the March, 1986 issue of Private Pilot. It was released in Private Pilot on January 29, 1986. The release of the ad set in motion a very unexpected and unusual coincidence. The art used in the ad was a line art drawing of the space shuttle. The ad was released one day after the January 28 space shuttle tragedy. For students, this unforseeable set of circumstances added a strange touch of reality to the project, and demonstrated how unpredictable the effects of a real-life situation can be on an advertising effort. The class discussed how the shuttle connection would affect the advertisement, in both positive and negative ways. On one level the shuttle tragedy would create a heightened awareness of the ad; on another level the ad would remind prospective aviation students of a tragic occurence in a field they were contemplating careers in.

Conclusion

One of the highlights of undertaking this project was that everyone benefited from its implementation. The students whose designs were used in the ad received the prestige of having their work published in a national magazine. The rest of the students gained experience, valuable criticism of their work by professionals, and material for their portfolios. The client (in this case the Center for Aerospace Sciences) received a multitude

of advertising ideas for a fraction of the cost it would have taken to hire an outside agency. The instructor was allowed a pleasant deviation from the normal classroom routine. And overall, the institution at large benefited from the rapport established between the two departments.

I would hope the success of this initial endeavor lends itself to more inter-departmental projects. The concept could be applied to any department within the university, and could save the expense of hiring outside services. The university would also discover what students have to offer their school.

I'd like to end with a reminder that advertising instructors who perceive themselves to be playing in the minors, and many of us are, can show their students how the game is played in the majors. The prospective clients are at any university or college. They only need to be discovered and cultivated. We shouldn't be expected to do less for our students. Being in the minors isn't so bad if you have a major attitude.